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ABSTRACT

This is a speech presented at the inauguration of Dallin H. Oaks as president of Brigham Young University. The author discusses the history of institutions of higher education, the philosophy underlying the creation of such institutions, and offers an extensive critique of the Office of Education's "Report on Higher Education." He calls for universities to reaffirm their identity and purpose within this framework. (HS)

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A CELEBRATION OF LEADERSHIP

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Address by
EDWARD H. LEVI
at the inauguration of
DALLIN H. OAKS
as President of
Brigham Young University
November 12, 1971
Provo, Utah

It is for me a special pleasure to take part in this proceeding, celebrating the return of a son of Brigham Young University to assume its leadership. These words hardly capture the sentiment of my participation. The University of Chicago also claims Dallin Oaks as her son. We knew him as student. We know him as colleague. These are not formal relationships, but deep personal ties. We are familiar with his unique qualities of mind and spirit and obligation to serve which have drawn him to this position of responsibility. Thus, we share with you the pride in his considerable accomplishments which have brought him distinction in his profession, and as a scholar and teacher, and which have prepared him for this honor and duty. While we shall miss him, we will continue to claim vicarious credit for the good things he will do. We rejoice with you in the promise and inevitability of this occasion. We congratulate Brigham Young University and President Oaks for this sign that some things are right in the world.

The inauguration of a President is more than the calling of an individual. The event invites a university to reaffirm its identity. Universities are not the invention of modern times. They are the inheritors of a tradition which reaches back in terms not only of centuries but of millenniums, antedating all present governments, antedating many of the social forms and customs upon which our society seems to be based. This tradition is a continuing wellspring—not because it is old, but because it relates to man's desire to inquire, to discover, to communicate, and by this means to extend his knowledge. To be sure, universities are established and supported to fulfill contemporary purposes and other objectives. Medieval towns vied with each other for the renown and revenue they hoped local centers of learning would bring. The fearful persuasion of words causes princes and orders to endow academies so that this power might be captured for political or social ends. Requirements for specific training have created schools of higher learning and shaped their programs.

There are countless examples of this from the earliest times to the present. When the Emperor Constantine undertook the building of

Byzantium as the New Rome, it is said he discovered that in the decline of the arts of the empire, "the skills as well as numbers of his architects bore a very unequal proportion to the greatness of his designs. The magistrates of the most distant provinces were therefore directed to institute schools, to appoint professors, and by the hopes of rewards and privileges, to engage in the study and practice of architecture a sufficient number of ingenious youths who had received a liberal education."[1]

Our modern view of education is much the same. When we thought we were lagging in the international competition of applied science, we demanded the production of engineers. Today concern for the environment has produced calls for a new technology which the schools are expected to meet.

It might be taken as a commentary, both on the need for such efforts and on some inevitable limitation upon them, that the Emperor Constantine, despite his edict, felt that he had to adorn his new city by despoiling the cities of Greece and Asia of the ornaments created five hundred years before by the masters of the age of Pericles and Alexander, and that many of the buildings of the new city "were finished in so hasty and imperfect a manner, that under Constantine's successor, they were preserved with difficulty from impending ruin."[2] Perhaps the students who benefited from Constantine's order later did contribute to the arts. Universities are likely to ride on the tides which present themselves, and the immediate results may not be the important ones.

Universities do respond to a variety of opportunities and pressures. Nevertheless, the recent *Report on Higher Education*—disseminated through the Office of Education, and most highly praised by the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare—complains that institutions of higher education reflect "less and less the interests of society."[3] The *Report* urges that higher education "break free from the conventional wisdom,"[4] and display "a sense of realism and a sensitivity to public concern as it recharts its future."[5]

The basic criticism the *Report* levels at colleges and universities is that our "system of higher education as a whole is now strikingly

uniform,"[6] that nearly all the 2,500 institutions of higher learning in the United States have adopted the same mode of teaching and learning.

"Individuals today," the *Report* says, "have a choice among colleges which are 'easy' or 'tough,' 'first rate' or 'third rate.' This is essentially a choice derived from the differences in the prestige and orientation of faculties, and the consequent rigor of admission policies and academic offerings. It is not a choice between institutions which offer different modes of learning, but between institutions which differ in the extent to which they conform to the model of the prestige university."[7]

A considerable part of the importance of the *Report* is concealed in that language. The momentum of their own indoctrination, unconscious imitation and the desire to conform do undoubtedly limit the responsiveness of our institutions. Francis Bacon, in his historic attack on the academies of the seventeenth century, berated their acceptance of an outworn model, their undue reliance on the accepted classical philosophers, whose doctrines were "nearly," so Bacon said, "the talk of idle old men to ignorant youths."[8] These works had survived, he said, not because the test of history had preserved the best, but because "time, like a river, bears down to us that which is light and inflated, and sinks that which is heavy and solid."[9]

It is easiest for us to continue doing what we have been doing. Perhaps this is one reason why, at least in the past, important learning and invention have taken place outside the universities.

The recent *Report* is much concerned with the dissatisfaction of students; it links the failure to alleviate this dissatisfaction to the necessity to create more instruments of education which will change society. I do not know how many students today would describe their education as "scholastical trash."[10] If they did, they would be following in the footsteps of John Milton, who used similar words to describe what he termed the "asinine"[11] placed before him as a student at Cambridge. It would be difficult to argue against, and we should welcome the conclusion of the *Report* that the time has come for all higher educational institutions to

re-examine their academic programs in the light of their aspirations and to differentiate their missions.

The festivity of this day, which looks to the future, asks for a reaffirmation of the goals to be pursued. The recommitment gains in significance not only because of the character and history of this university, but because we are in a period of national skepticism, or perhaps in a time of transition from skepticism to values as yet undetermined.

The disturbing resemblance between our age and other periods, such as the third century, B.C. in Greece and the fourth century in Rome —when Rome was filled with schools—has been much noticed. Those ages were marked by loss of faith and lack of will. The suggestion has not been long in coming that education itself, because of its emphasis on reason, its undermining of superstition, its questioning of values, is one of the causes of the decline of commitment. Reason, it is said, is all right for those who can take it, but many cannot. The warning is that the effort to lead too much of a society in the ways of reason is self-defeating. The result is aimlessness encouraged by the loss of belief and the discarding of customs. Far from advancing the state of mankind, the argument runs, the consequence will require the retracing of steps, and this at a time when new powers of destruction and the complexity of the social order will make the way back more hazardous.

The *Report on Higher Education* stresses its conclusion that "only when basic changes occur will many segments of the American population find attendance at college a useful learning experience."[12] It calls for new institutions, but it believes that competition from these new institutions will be an important pressure for reforming the existing ones. Significantly, the *Report* places the greatest emphasis on students whose scholarly interests cannot be assumed, or are lacking. The authors favor new forms of academic experience outside the academic mode—an emphasis, for example, on off-campus work, subjective or practical experience, programs which will meet the needs of particular clienteles, guide and accredit work experience, service local com-

munities, and provide a meaningful social life outside the home and the neighborhood. No doubt each of these ventures strikes a responsive chord.

The necessity for the emphasis on the educating value of many experiences in life would ring strange to many of the founders of our republic, who were self-taught, yet well taught, and with a practical bent. Yet this report is surely to have been expected, for our country has ventured upon a unique experiment. No other time nor place has seen so comprehensive an effort in formal higher education. Some 50 per cent of the relevant age group now find themselves as students within this structure.[13] This is more than three times the percentage of students in higher education in the United Kingdom or in France. The prediction has been made, in a Presidential message, that the number will rise to 70 per cent by 1976.[14] Many in our country, as well as abroad, have become concerned that higher education has become too extensive. But while the *Report* concludes that the college degree plays too large a role in American life, it does not seek to decrease the number of students. Indeed, it looks toward their increase, broadening the included age span, reaching new segments of the population.

It should not surprise us that the *Report* says very little about the aims of education. It does say that "questions about efficiency lead to a host of questions about the nature and purposes of higher education."[15] It speaks of the enormous value of getting a liberal education, and of the contribution to the United States and, in fact, the world, of the great liberal arts and science centers, of students absorbed in studies for the sake of those studies alone, of scholarship and research in every field. But it quickly adds that "these achievements should not cause us to blunt our criticisms."[16] Its main attack is against the comprehensive institution, which probably is its view of most major universities as they have developed. Its remedy is to insist upon diversification, probably the dismantling of many operations, and the creation of new institutions and methods which will be outside the academic mode. The reform of society and the improve-

ment of the quality of life for all are the noble goals.

The *Report* could have the opposite effect to what it intends by increasing the pressure upon institutions not to identify, but to multiply these objectives. The dream of the *Report* is extraordinarily seductive, for it concerns almost all the good and pleasurable things in life. Indeed, it is difficult to think of any basic institution, unless possibly the family, which is clearly excluded from this overwhelming conception of the reach of the system of higher education.

An analogy which does not do justice to the splendor of the vision, but which is perhaps suggestive of a portion of the variety included, is the guidebook description of the Tivoli Gardens, the famous amusement park in Copenhagen:

> It is probably the gayest and most beautiful in the world. It has everything: a superb pantomime theatre, an ultra-modern concert hall with three symphony concerts each evening, open air acrobatic shows, two bands, and the usual array of rides and amusements plus the popular Funny Kitchen where you can indulge in an orgy of smashing china, better than analysis! There are fountains, a lake to go boating in, the famous Tivoli Boy Guards of toytown soldiers all dressed up in the king's uniform, and fabulous fireworks on Wednesday, Saturday, Sundays and holidays.[17]

One could do worse. Tivoli Gardens was created to be responsive. I suppose the authors of the *Report* would reply that the analogy fits the modern comprehensive university, which seeks to be all things to everyone.

In many ways the *Report* can be a contribution to our thoughtfulness about our present situation. The enrichment of life and greater access to its enjoyment are goals universally endorsed. There are many roads to learning and a variety of cultural experiences. It does not seem fruitful to argue about what should be called a college or a university, or a center of learning, or even as to what should be included in what is called one system of higher education. The conception of the great array may lead us to a better understanding of our problems.

The democratization of higher education imposes burdens. We should expect them.

When the President of the United States announces, as he has, that "no qualified student who wants to go to college should be barred by lack of money,"[18] he is not only talking about economics. He is stating a goal which depends for much of its significance upon the accomplishment of effective prior training in the primary and secondary schools, and the availability and recognition of later alternative ways for preparation. It assumes also that within the structure, a sufficient number of institutions will find ways to remove those incidental barriers which, because they are not central to the education to be pursued, and because they fall unevenly upon students of different background and training, are likely to deny admission to many who are qualified. Over a long period, the insistence of the English universities on Latin and Greek as entrance requirements meant that "only the products of a comparatively small number of schools were eligible."[19] This is a symbol of which we should need no reminder.

But there are other responsibilities. At least for some areas and for some institutions, there is the obligation to require learning and mastery of the student who has been admitted. The increasing variety of agencies and endeavors may pose different objectives, change the expected quality of performance, make possible the acknowledgement of special attributes. In support of diverse ways for communication and learning, new forms of recognition may be devised to enable a student to show, whatever his course, that he, indeed, has achieved a mastery and that he does excel. A system of national examinations in particular subjects may be such a way.

But we should not, in the name of diversity, nor the encouragement of motivation, nor through unintended disdain for the excellence of which democracy is capable, pretend to accomplishments which have not been attained. This has been the cardinal error, which all now recognize, of many primary and secondary schools. It is a false kindness or a malicious indifference.

The *Report on Higher Education* is particularly valuable because it reminds us of the way things are. Its extended, all-embracing

view of higher education is a description of society itself with its many pressures, endeavors, and aspirations. The impression which the *Report* gives that most academic institutions are much the same is a kind of artifact of sociological talk. It fails to reveal enormous differences of history and aim. These institutions, in turn, exist individually—not just as types—alongside countless other agencies and organizations, community and cultural activities. By extending the concept of education to include most of these other agencies, organizations and activities, existing or possible, the *Report* serves to emphasize the kinds of choices a society consciously or otherwise must make. It is in this context that individuals find their way, and institutions justify their purposes.

Universities are creations of the spirit and of the mind. Their individuality reflects particular circumstances and purposes. Persistent effort and continual struggle have made them possible. But they achieve their greatest strength and service from participation in the tradition which seeks to elevate the mind of man: to enlarge the powers of the mind through the creation and possession of the intellectual disciplines and skills, to deepen the comprehension of values, to engage in the pursuit of truth. "When the human mind has once despaired of discovering truth, everything begins to languish."[20] When the human mind is led to the joy of discovery, all mankind grows.

Universities cannot preempt, they can only assist in, the search for truth. They can add values which arise from their mission to understand, from their teaching which bears witness to discovery, from their inquiries which seek out the order and the mysteries. These are the values which can give meaning to a true democratization of learning.

This celebration of leadership, I trust, affirms these values.

[1] Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), I, 514.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 520.
[3] Frank Newman *et al.*, *Report on Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), p. vii.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[8] Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (London: William Pickering, 1844), First Book, p. 46.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[10] John Milton, *The Works of John Milton,* ed. Frank Allen Patterson *et al.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), VI, 95.

[11] *Ibid.*, IV, 280.

[12] Newman, *Report,* p. ix.

[13] Richard M. Nixon, *Education for the 1970's—Renewal and Reform* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1970), p. 22.

[14] Nixon, *Education,* p. 22.

[15] Newman, *Report,* p. 32.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. ix.

[17] Eugene Fodor, ed., *Fodor's Guide to Europe* (New York: David McKay Co., 1965), p. 230.

[18] Nixon, *Education,* p. 21.

[19] Hugh Kearney, *Scholars and Gentlemen* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 177.

[20] Bacon, *Novum Organum,* p. 41.